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IRAN'S LIKELY REACTION TO IRAQI USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

4 November 1983

Summary

Iraq has used both lethal and non-lethal chemical weapons against the Iranians during the war. Non-lethal CS (tear gas) has contributed to Iraqi success in defending against massed infantry assaults. Mustard agent, the only chemical warfare agent used by the Iraqis, has been used only recently. It has been generally less effective than the Iraqis had hoped although it has caused some Iranian military and civilian casualties. The Iraqis are producing additional mustard agent, but we doubt they are capable of producing enough to significantly affect the outcome of the fighting.

Iran is unlikely to be deterred from pursuing the war because of Iraq's use of chemical weapons. If the Iraqis are able to employ mustard agent more effectively, Iran will be forced to adjust its military tactics and acquire additional protective gear but it will continue to launch attacks on Iraq. We have no evidence that Iran has lethal chemical agents or that it is making an effort to acquire any. If Iraqi use of mustard agent improves we would expect Iran to seek sources of lethal chemical agents. Iran has publicly condemned Iraqi use of chemical weapons and is seeking evidence to present to the UN. Even a strong international condemnation of Iraq for using mustard agent is unlikely to cause Iraq to cease employing it.

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Background

The first large-scale use of non-lethal chemical agents by the Iraqis occurred in July 1982 near Basrah during the initial Iranian invasion of Iraq. The Iraqis used mortar rounds loaded with CS (tear gas) to break up at least one Iranian infantry assault.

The tear gas was effective, because Iranian forces were surprised and had not taken the necessary defensive precautions. Tear gas was used in subsequent battles with mixed results.

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Although Iraq reportedly has possessed mustard agent for over a year, we believe Baghdad initially used it during fighting in Iraqi Kurdistan in July 1983. After Iranian forces captured the small Iraqi army outpost at Haj Umran, Baghdad ordered a counterattack to retake a key mountain overlooking Iranian positions. After repeated attacks failed, President Saddam Hussein authorized the use of mustard agent to weaken Iranian defenses.

50 250-kilogram bombs filled with mustard agent were used along with tear gas to enable Iraqi commandos to retake the mountain. Senior Iraqi chemical warfare officers, however, reportedly criticized the employment of mustard agent, because they felt faulty control measures largely negated its effectiveness and because its use risked international condemnation.

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Despite this criticism, Iraqi commanders were authorized to use mustard agent again in October during the Iranian attack toward the Iraqi town of Panjwin.

in the first two days of the battle, Iraqi Air Force and artillery units used their entire inventory of mustard agent in an attempt to stop the Iranian advance. The Iranians reportedly adopted new tactics and dispersed their forces into small groups to limit casualties. Nevertheless, some Iranian troops have suffered multiple blisters and blindness and at least four Iranians have died as a result of the most recent chemical attacks

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Baghdad reportedly has been unable to keep up with the demand from units at the front for additional mustard agent.

Iraq can produce only about 1,000 pounds of mustard agent daily. Iraq reportedly plans to try to purchase automatic loaders from Italy to permit more rapid loading of the agent into artillery rounds and bombs.

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Iranian Reaction

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Unless the Iraqis are able to improve their use of mustard agent--which is likely as they become more familiar with it--Iran is not likely to seek lethal chemical weapons. If the Iraqis produce or acquire large new supplies of mustard agent, they almost certainly would use it against Iranian troops and towns near the border. If used in large quantities over a small area, the weapons probably would create a large number of Iranian casualties and, more importantly, could affect Iranian troop morale. Thus far the Iraqis appear to have used the weapon haphazardly, with insufficient safety precautions.

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~~We believe a major, successful Iraqi chemical warfare attack on Tehran's troops would cause the Iranians to search for their own source of chemical weapons. This, however, would be a long-term prospect unless supplies were forthcoming from abroad.~~

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We do not believe that effective Iraqi use of mustard agent would force Iran to end the war. Indeed, it is likely to make Tehran even more determined to continue the fighting and reinforce Khomeini's perception that peace with Saddam Husayn is impossible.

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Instead, we would expect Iran to adjust its tactics to account for Iraq's more effective use of mustard agent. Most Iranian soldiers could be protected from the lethal affects of the weapon by wearing protective masks and clothing. Iranian army units have protective masks but we are unaware of how well these are distributed to personnel in the field. The Iranians already have implemented dispersal tactics to limit casualties, and we would expect these tactics to be refined and used regularly if the Iraqis increase use of mustard agent.

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If the attacks persisted, Iran would likely escalate its response. Tehran would see such a quantum improvement as beyond Baghdad's capability and requiring the aid of an outside power, presumably the US or France. Its response, therefore, might be directed not only at the Iraqis, but also at US or French targets in the Middle East or the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

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International Reaction

~~the Iranians are trying to acquire proof of Iraq's use of mustard agent to present to the UN. As Iraqi attacks continue and intensify the chances increase that Iranian forces will acquire a shell containing mustard agent and with Iraqi markings. Tehran would take such evidence to the UN and charge US complicity in violating international law.~~

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No international outcry against Iraq is likely unless Iran secures firm evidence of Iraq's widespread use of chemical agents. Even then, the international community is unlikely to employ economic or political sanctions against Iraq after failing to institute them against the USSR for using chemical weapons in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia. Any publicity about Iraq's widespread use of chemical weapons could setback recent efforts to strengthen Iraqi-US ties depending on the position taken by the US.

~~International publicity or condemnation of Iraq for using chemical weapons against Iran is unlikely to cause Baghdad to stop using them. Iraq feels justified in using any weapon to prevent Iran from crossing the border and has been careful to use chemical weapons only in such circumstances.~~